

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



From Concrete to CSP for Conservation Stewardship

By Jason Johnson, February 2012

When Brent and Teresa Voss moved to rural Dexter in 1994 they viewed it as more of a place to settle their concrete/foundation business than to develop a large farming operation. But that soon changed. Just a week after purchasing their home property, they bought a nearby 80 acres of farmland.

Nearly two decades later the couple still has their booming concrete business – Voss Concrete, Inc. – but they also have a booming farming operation with 2,000 acres of crop, hay and pastureland, as well as 300 cows and between 500-1,000 feeder cattle.

Brent grew up on a family farm in Oskaloosa, but it wasn't until he began raising livestock in Dallas County that he gained a better understanding of land stewardship and properly managing livestock.

After years of working with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to implement a complete conservation plan on his farm, Voss was awarded a Conservation Stewardship

Program (CSP) contract in 2010 on nearly 1,500 cropland and 262 pasture acres. Under CSP, NRCS pays participants for conservation performance: the higher the operational performance, the higher the payment.

CSP is a voluntary program that encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner. Land-owners agree to undertake additional conservation activities and improve, maintain and manage existing conservation practices. Voss is implementing a suite of practices that will address wildlife habitat, soil erosion, water quality, and pasture management.

Through CSP, Voss recently planted cover crops on 75 acres of cropland and is making changes to how he harvests hay to allow wildlife to flush and escape. "[NRCS District Conservationist] Brad Harrison has been really good at providing advice on how to better the land," said Brent.

A few years prior, Brent utilized financial and technical assistance through NRCS and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to install



Brent and Teresa Voss began to farm on their own in the mid-90s, and quickly became good stewards of the land.



Voss built three hoop buildings to house livestock, completely eliminating the threat of manure runoff in this location.

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three new hoop buildings to house livestock. “We’ve learned a lot from NRCS about how to properly manage and take care of livestock in an environmentally-friendly way,” he said.

Hoop buildings also provide a healthier environment for growth, and aid in animal handling, manure management, feeding and ventilation. They eliminate the need for sediment basins, or holding ponds, reducing odor and potential groundwater contamination. In addition, hoop buildings provide more comfortable conditions than an open feedlot, which often leads to healthier and more productive cattle.

Voss is also storing and applying manure in a more environmentally-friendly way thanks to a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP), which is required of all new livestock facilities installed with EQIP financial assistance. His CNMP includes his entire farm. “Implementing all of these new conservation practices and strategies has been an education for me,” said Voss. “It has helped the farming operation. It has been exciting and fun learning, and at the same time I feel good about being a better steward of the land.”

For more information about NRCS conservation programs in Iowa, go to www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov or visit your local NRCS office.

Voss Enrolls Historic Land in Permanent Easement

Brent Voss is retiring 14 acres of Dallas County cropland that is perhaps best known as the former location of a popular entertainment park and later a famous Bonnie and Clyde shootout in the 1930s. The land will be seeded to native plants and grasses following years of constant flooding.

Voss purchased the property in 2000 to grow corn and soybeans. The land was row cropped for most of the last 75 years, but Voss says the quick-rising, fast-moving Raccoon River leaves behind tree debris and sand deposits when it leaves its banks. “I



The South Raccoon River rises quickly between Dexter and Redfield in Dallas County during heavy rain events, causing cropland flooding.

spent thousands of dollars cleaning out everything that gets deposited there,” he said. “It was costing me more than what I was making off of it for sure.”

Voss utilized the Emergency Watershed Protection Program-Floodplain Easements (EWP-FPE) to restore the land to its natural state. Restoration work – which will take place later this year on the easement – includes planting native grasses, mixed to fit the local ecosystem. The EWP-FPE is administered by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). “The goal is to allow floodwater into the restored floodplain, allowing it to slowly recede back into the water body without causing damage to the environment or infrastructure,” said Larry Beeler, Iowa NRCS assistant state conservationist for programs.

Beeler says the restored floodplain will generate increased flood protection, enhanced fish and wildlife habitat, improved water quality, and a reduced need for future public disaster assistance. Other benefits include reduced energy consumption when certain agricultural activities and practices are eliminated and increased carbon sequestration as permanent vegetative cover is re-established.

“Putting that farm in the [EWP-FPE] Program is the best thing for that river bottom,” said Voss.

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A permanent sign overlooks the historic land than Brent Voss is enrolling into a permanent easement.

The EWP-FPE easement deed allows Voss to manage the land with such habitat management practices as mowing and potentially prescribed burning, but he cannot build any infrastructure there or plant crops on the easement property. “Most landowners use the retired cropland for hunting and fishing, or other recreational activities like bird watching,” said Brad Harrison, NRCS district conservationist in Dallas County.

Dexfield Park History

From 1915-1933, the property was home to Dexfield Park – a popular Sunday getaway for Central Iowans. The park included a spring-fed swimming pool, an open-air dance hall, amusement park rides, a canoe rental area, a small zoo, and a restaurant that served sandwiches and ice cream. According to a monument near the property, as many as 4,000 people visited Dexfield Park on Sundays.

Leone Coulter Wells, whose father Charles Coulter worked in the restaurant, recounts a large movie screen that showed movies every Sunday night. “On the hillside south of that was a free campground and many people set up tents and vacationed there,” she said.

“Up a steep hill to the east side of the park was a skating rink where you could rent skates and listen to music,” said Coulter Wells. “When I was in school we went out there for our parties. There were also different forms of free entertainment and side-shows.”

Barrow Gang Shootout

After a good run as Dexfield Park, the southwest Dallas County property took another historic turn in the summer of 1933. The abandoned park served as a hideout for outlaws Bonnie Parker, Clyde Barrow and the rest of the infamous Barrow gang.

The Depression era robbers were recovering from injuries sustained in a Missouri gun battle when they were spotted by a local farmer. A group of state agents, county officers and local law enforcement gathered on July 24 to capture the Barrow gang. A shootout ensued leaving Clyde’s brother Buck fatally wounded, Buck’s wife Blanche captured, and W.D. Jones and Bonnie injured.

Bonnie, Clyde and Jones were able to escape across the Raccoon River to the nearby Feller Farm where, at gunpoint, they ordered Vallie Feller, his son Marvelle and hired man, Walt Spillers, to lift a badly wounded Bonnie into the Feller’s car. The vehicle was later found bloodstained and damaged in Polk City.

In May 1934 Bonnie and Clyde were gunned down in Louisiana, ending the gang’s notorious crime spree.

And now, nearly eight decades later, the fourteen acres with the storied past will produce another story – not as flashy, but undoubtedly more quiet, peaceful and better for the environment.

To read more about Dexfield Park and the Barrow Gang Shootout, visit www.dexteriowa.org and click on “Historical Attractions.”